DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 281 607 PS 016 304

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TITLE Screening for School Entry.
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SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 87
CONTRACT 400-86-0023
NOTE 3p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Early Childhood Education; Identification; Kindergarten; *School Entrance Age; *School Readiness Tests; *Screening Tests; *Testing Problems; Test Validity; *Young Children
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests; *Screening Procedures

ABSTRACT

Screening programs are now widely used with children who are age-eligible for school entry. Screening is used to identify children who may be at risk of future difficulty in school (e.g., inability to meet academic expectations) and those who may have special needs in learning (e.g., extraordinary abilities and talents or handicapping conditions). Because screening is intended for all the children, screening measures should be inexpensive, brief, simple to administer, and easy to interpret. Screening alone is not sufficient for decisions about a child's placement or kind of instruction, and further assessment is necessary. Screening practices vary greatly, and important issues concerning screening at school entry are: (1) Should young children's behavior be measured? (2) Is screening harmful? (3) Is screening valid? (4) What should screening measure or observe--readiness or development? (5) How should children's abilities be measured? and (6) How should screening information be used? To insure that all children needing special programs are identified, educators should clarify the purpose of screening, keep informed about research on screening tools, and adopt procedures that screen for current levels of functioning in a broad range of domains. Children should be rescreened periodically and assessed diagnostically to confirm their needs. (NH)

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SCREENING FOR SCHOOL ENTRY

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Screening programs for children entering school are used to predict which pupils are likely to have problems in regular classrooms and to identify those who may be eligible for particular programs, such as special education. Screening practices vary greatly from state to state, according to a national survey (Gracey and others, 1984), and their use is increasing. This digest discusses issues related to screening and screening procedures.

The Purpose of Screening

The terms "screening" and "assessment" are not interchangeable. Screening is a preliminary process for identifying children who may be at risk of future difficulty in school (e.g., inability to meet academic expectations) and those who may have special needs in learning (e.g., extraordinary abilities and talents or handicapping conditions). In both cases, the identified children must be assessed more carefully to evaluate whether they do indeed require adaptations of the regular instructional program, or qualify for specialized educational placement. Because screening is intended for all the children, the measures should be inexpensive, brief, simple to administer, and easy to interpret. Screening tools require lower predictive power than diagnostic measures. Thus, screening alone is not sufficient for decisions about a child's placement or kind of instruction. Further assessment is necessary. (Meisels and others, 1984).

Eligibility for School Entry

Many schools now screen age-eligible children to determine school readiness, even though educators disagree about what determines a child's chances of success in school. One reason for this trend is that escalating standards in the early grades have altered curriculum, causing more entering children to be at risk of failure.

School entry is usually based upon birth date. When chronological age is the criterion, the 12-month age range, and individual differences in development and experience almost always result in a heterogeneous group. Schools have tried several measures to cope with that variation (Uphoff and Gilmore, 1985), including delayed entry for the youngest children, slower-paced classes for immature children, and transitional classes for some children. Screening is often used to find those children who, after further assessment, seem to be good candidates for one of these options.

Keeping children in the regular program may be more beneficial in the long run and can further equal educational opportunity (Laosa, 1977; May and Welch, 1986). Controlled studies of children held back and those in regular programs do not show significant advantages for holding back (Shepard and Smith, 1985). Screening and assessment can be used to identify children who may need more individual help or smaller classes to remain with their peers.

Issues in Screening

The underlying question about screening at school entry is whether young children's behavior should be measured. Is screening harmful? Is it valid? Goodwin and Driscoll (1980) claim that charges of harm are not substantiated. Instead, the issues are what, how, when, and why.

What should screening measure or observe? Two basic kinds of tests are associated with screening and assessment of children entering school: school readiness tests and developmental screening tests (Meisels, 1986). Readiness tests yield information about the extent to which a child has acquired the knowledge and skills considered to be important entry criteria for a particular program. Developmental screening tests provide information about a child's performance in broad areas of normal development and potential to acquire further knowledge and skills. Both kinds of information are important, but one kind of measure cannot be substituted for the other.

How should children's abilities be measured? Tapping broad developmental areas—language, intellectual and perceptual functioning, and motor coordination—will help to assure validity. Screening should also include the social-emotional domain, since children with early behavioral problems often have problems later in school (Gracey and others, 1984).

Screening procedures should sample what children know and can do in situations in which they are comfortable. Young children's behavior is affected by unfamiliar situations. If children have difficulty responding (e.g., using pencils to write or mark on forms), they may not be able to demonstrate their actual abilities.

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Information from multiple sources—parents, teachers, and others, using informal tools to augment any tests and checklists—will present a more adequate picture of a child's current functioning.

Educators who select screening instruments should insist upon accepted standards (Meisels and others, 1984):

- Were norm-referenced measures developed on a population including children like the ones to be screened?
- Are the measures valid and reliable?
- Are they sensitive, correctly identifying children possibly at risk?
- Are they specific, correctly excluding others from further assessment?

When should children be screened? Young children change rapidly, especially in social-emotional development (Gallerani and others, 1982). Individual growth factors may cause problems to appear later or early problems may be overcome with further development and learning. Therefore, further screening should be done periodically.

How should screening information be used? Problematic children should be assessed diagnostically and results used to guide decisions about the programs children need. Otherwise, children may be:

- unfairly excluded from needed services or placed inappropriately
- kept in a program that no longer meets their needs
- subjected to lowered teacher expectations, diluted curriculum or narrow homogeneous groupings, constricting their opportunities to learn (Gredler, 1984).

Conclusions

Screening to identify children who may be prone to academic problems or eligible for specialized educational services is now prevalent at school entry and likely to continue. To insure that all such children are correctly identified, subsequently assessed, and ultimately offered appropriate education, educators should:

- clarify the purpose of screening for teacher, parents, administrators, and any others involved
- keep informed about research concerning screening tools and their usefulness
- adopt procedures that screen for current levels of functioning in a broad range of domains
- rescreen periodically and assess diagnostically to confirm children's needs
- keep standards for curricula and instruction appropriate for the vast majority of eligible children, customizing learning activities for individuals.

Screening programs should be used to identify those children who may need special kinds of help to function well in school, not to exclude them from programs for which they are legally eligible. Sound, ethical practice is to accept children in all their variety, identify any special needs they have, and offer them the best possible opportunity to grow and learn.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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This digest was prepared for the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, 1987.

OERI Office of Educational Research and Improvement

This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. OERI 400-86-0023. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or the Department of Education.